

In Michigan District, A New Look For Vocational Education

by [Sarah Alvarez](#)

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Classes like wood shop or auto shop used to be called vocational classes. They were known as an academic dumping ground for students who weren't succeeding in a regular classroom. But a lot has changed. In the rural mid-Michigan school district of Stockbridge, classes now offer a pathway to college, and a way to gain skills to pay tuition.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST: High school courses like woodshop or auto shop used to be called vocational classes. It was assumed that some kids would go to college and the other kids would just take vocational courses to learn a skill. But a lot has changed. Those classes now offer a pathway to college and a way to gain the skills to pay tuition.

Here's Sarah Alvarez of Michigan Radio.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: All right. Good morning, everybody. The Science Olympiad will meet this week on...

SARAH ALVAREZ, BYLINE: When kids from the rural mid-Michigan school district of Stockbridge go looking for work, they have to go pretty far. There are no jobs here to speak of. That means they're competing against applicants from bigger, richer districts for jobs. That's made the school system willing to embrace technical education in a big way, even when it had a serious image problem as second rate education.

Here's one example, a scene from the eighties classic "The Breakfast Club."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "THE BREAKFAST CLUB")

ANTHONY MICHAEL HALL: (as Brian Johnson) I thought I was playing it real smart, you know, 'cause I thought, yeah, I'd take shop and it would be an easy way to maintain my grade point average.

JUDD NELSON: (as John Bender) Why'd you think it'd be easy?

HALL: (as Brian Johnson) Have you seen some of the dopes that take shop?

ALVAREZ: But in Stockbridge it's not one kind of kid who takes shop. There's no stigma around these classes. They include offerings like alternative energy, underwater robotics and marketing. And students here aren't tracked into these classes because somebody doesn't think they're college material.

Duane Watson is one of a strong bench of technical education teachers at Stockbridge. He has a huge shop filled with wind turbine kits, four cars and a lot of other stuff.

DUANE WATSON: And one compact utility tractor, a snowplow going on a truck, an alternative fuel vehicle - i.e., a battery-powered golf cart...

ALVAREZ: Three students, all seniors, are working on cars in the shop today. All three, like Jacob Krummrey, are going to college.

JACOB KRUMMREY: I'm going into mechanical engineering and material sciences at Michigan State, so hands-on and stuff that I like.

ALVAREZ: The technical classes at Stockbridge feed a lot of kids into college classes that teach the skills employers say they want their workers to have. But Watson's shop is full of equipment from technical education programs that have shut down. That's in part because federal technical education funds have shrunk by \$140 million over the last two years. And good tech ed. teachers are hard to find because they can make a lot more money being an engineer, instead teaching high schoolers about engineering.

Also, the skills learned in technical classes don't often translate easily to high scores on standardized tests, or mesh with the national push for college readiness. But Stockbridge has held on to these programs because it knows they get kids into good jobs or colleges.

And Duane Watson says, for these students going to college, there's another incentive.

WATSON: I try to tell students when they come into this class you should be in here for one of two reasons: To make money or save money - or both.

ALVAREZ: Bram Ritsema is one of Watson's former students. He's now studying welding engineering at Ferris State University, where he's cutting metal in the welding lab.

ALVAREZ: On the weekends Ritsema works at a manufacturer not too far from here. He says the head start he got in high school is still working to his advantage.

BRAM RITSEMA: I still use so much of what I learned at Stockbridge, definitely on the how to manage a project and get it completed. My senior project in high school was a single axel utility trailer that I built myself. And it really taught me how to start a project and complete it all the way through to the end.

ALVAREZ: Students like Ritsema are a big part of why Stockbridge has held on to these technical education programs, through 10 years of district budget cuts. Their students use these classes as a springboard to skilled employment and higher education, even if they have to do both at the same time.

For NPR News, I'm Sarah Alvarez.

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